

# SPECTACLE

a field journal from Los Angeles



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a field journal from Los Angeles

## special effects number 4 september 1985

EDITOR/PUBLISHER.....Kathi Norklun  
GUEST EDITOR, 3-D.....Ray Zone  
ASSISTANT EDITOR.....Liese Gardner  
EDITORIAL COMMITTEE.....Sanda Agalidis  
                                  Joseph Di Mattia  
                                  Helen Knode  
                                  Lane Relyea  
ART DIRECTOR.....Jennifer Sinclair  
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                                  Jan Rowton  
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DEVELOPMENT.....Sue Dorman  
BOARD ADVISORS.....Christopher Knight  
                                  Jay Levin  
                                  Martine Tomczyk  
SPECIAL THANKS TO Kraig Grady, Al's Bar, L.A. Weekly,  
and Katherine Marking.

LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS: Carl Davis is an architect and artist currently working on a low-income artists housing project. ☐ Brad deGraf is the head of technical direction at Digital Productions. ☐ Joseph Di Mattia is the artistic director of Performance Theater. He writes on film, theater and art. ☐ Helen Knode is a staff writer for the L.A. Weekly. She writes on film, sex and politics. ☐ Daniel J. Martinez is a cross-media artist exploring the space between the third and fourth dimensions. ☐ Joseph Nechvatal is an artist in New York City. ☐ Bruce D. Rhodewalt is senior editor at the Times Mirror Video-Tex Services. ☐ Jim Shaw is a 33-year-old Silver Lake resident who works as a special effects artist and an art artist. ☐ John Stepling is continuing his work in theater with a new play, *The Dream Coast*, scheduled to open in the fall. ☐ Kathleen Thomas is an artist living in New York City. ☐ James Turrell's current project is the Roden Crater. ☐ Robert Williams is an underground cartoonist, an oil painter and the world's preeminent hot-rod artist. ☐ Ray Zone is a 3-D maniac, writer and photographer who loves Los Angeles.

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INSIDE COVER: pull-off poster of **Male Model**, by Jim Shaw.  
IMPORTANT: For proper 3-D viewing, wear red lens over left eye.



# EDITORIAL

## Kathi Norklun

The void of content at the center of special effects is a necessary one.

Special effects are an extreme stylization of technology. High style is essentially conservative, depending on clichés and reinforced patterns of communications around which to spin its dazzle. The center is without charge, effectively a zero. The unexpected and disrupted do not occupy it; these are confined to the mechanics of style. The zero-gravity vacuum at the center of special effects is necessary for the workings of its stylish technology to be played out.

The current brand of special effects, associated with *Star Wars*, is called "seamless": you can't tell an effect from reality. But this doesn't mean the effects stay in the background. Not at all. They become the protagonist. They mesmerize. They take over, like a roller coaster — they transport. They become complete, a whole experience. Hermetically sealed.

The emotion is wonder. Wonder is an attribute of innocence. Innocence is a product of civilization. Adam and Eve were innocent not before the Fall, but after, retrospectively. We oppose innocence to acculturation, but the opposition is itself acculturated. The wonder we experience at special effects is contrived, complicitous. It occurs within the context of a rigidly defined status quo. Technological wonder is a simulation of natural wonder, as media is a simulation of the life web.

Wonder is also an extreme passive state. The preeminence of special effects is the apotheosis of the spectator.

### FROM SURREALISM TO SUPERREALISM

The original *Twilight Zone* television series depended for its effect on an easily identifiable reality construct that was disrupted. The opening shots, often wordless, served to establish the situation. The barest outline — a saloon, a horse, a gun, a town drunk and (wild card) a traveling peddler's wagon — was sufficient. The viewers filled in the rest from the stock media mythology with which they were familiar.

The show's clichés — the city dweller in the country, the girl next door, the addicted gambler, the Western saloon, the small town, the local pub — were recognized as such by the creators, who could thus play with the terms. The stance is not that of an avant-garde, though it does posit an exemption from the norm. It is the stance of an anthropological age, in which each man is an island contemplating the ocean of his culture. The norm — that small town the '50s so favored — is other, an occurrence in another time and place, a projected ideal — shared, perhaps, but a game to the onlooker and to the creators of the series.

Rod Serling personifies the observer. By voice

or, classically, in body, he injects himself and reiterates what we have just seen. His conversation is relegated to commentary. (Serling's persona of ironic commentator is one all of us raised on the media have internalized.) Serling disappears behind the curtain of a commercial break, and then the initial setup is played out. The story will involve some jarring central juxtaposition, familiar terms wrongly interfaced — time changes, scale changes, outer-space visitors turn out to be us, we turn out to be aliens, or an ordinary person or thing acquires an extraordinary power. The thrill lies in watching the rules by which reality is constructed be broken.

The rupture is healed by the end. The visitors leave, the protagonist shifts out of the twilight zone back into normalcy or sometimes from one wrong zone to another. The evidence disappears. Often a strong, sappy moral is invoked. Serling wraps it up for us.

The so-called seamless special effects of *Star Wars*, and of the many science fiction movies that have followed in its wake, imply a hermetically sealed world. Reality is no longer ruptured by an extraneous element, one that comes from the realm of the imagination; reality is created whole cloth, seamless. Everything is equally imaginary, equally real. This law of simulation is the germinal idea of another batch of science fiction stories, the ones dealing with possible alternative worlds, each with its own self-contained system of operation. (The systems are simple enough to be grasped by a mind distracted by the details of a foreign landscape.)

In these worlds, those who are not passive spectators, who do not represent the audience to itself within the film, are guides, serving merely to spring the traps. Guides, or quarry: They run through a maze of a world, one step ahead of the monster or about to collide with it. Exposition takes the form of playing out the patterns, as in a video game. We are amazed. Each world is set up to house its special effects, which become its main character, embodied in an Alien, a Terminator. We enter a world in which we do not find ourselves but lose ourselves, and are given back to ourselves at the end, intact, preserved, unruptured, hermetically sealed, like virgins.

*Twilight Zone* is a model for discovering the bizarre in the ordinary. Now we have Steven Spielberg, whose movies depend on a reality construct that is less ideal than the '50s small town but less remote, more familiar: the world of '60s suburbia, with its stock mythology of Mom and the kids, an absent or inadequate father, material happiness. Spielberg enlivens his construct with an alien, a poltergeist, a time warp. But these extraneous elements do not disrupt — they are assimilated into his homogenized system.

Spielberg makes the extraordinary ordinary. A time machine is a DeLorean, an E.T. is a pet, a poltergeist moves chairs and inhabits children's toys, a mother ship is something to leave your

wife for. His metaphors are mundane, and his special effects — his and Industrial Light and Magic's — rapidly become self-referencing signatures, clichés, like the flying bicycle from *E.T.* that has become the logo for Amblin Entertainment. Everything is safe and secure, and everything comes full circle.

The suburban lifestyle becomes transparent on the screen, and the special effects permeate the membrane. (Spielberg's special effects are close up, unavoidable, manipulative.) Spielberg accurately evokes suburbia's sense of humor, its bathos and materialism. He takes it all at face value; reality is a lifestyle to be shed once in a while. His characters do no more than his audience — they are transported for the space (time) of the film into a fantasy of special effects that reduces back down to the trite, the ordinary. The attitude of the everyday resumes. In this game one always returns to home base, to the security of the familiar and protective that '60s suburbia embodied.

### THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY

We wonder at death. In a recent Honda commercial, drenched in the symbolism of Spielbergian cinematography, the camera tracks through a typical suburban house, up the stairs toward a strangely illuminated room. In the room, an androgynous child is jumping up and down on the bed. The celestial light from the window streams past his nearly ecstatic face. The motion slows and, at the peak of a jump, the frame freezes. The voiceover intones, "You've been looking for it all your life."

Within this enactment of sex on the promised (parents') bed is a death trip, implied by the supernaturalistic light, embodied by the motorcycle (which never appears). The constellation of technology, death and desire is a readily recognizable one, and the motorcycle is a commonly understood metaphor for a death trip.

Technology is death. It is the face of death and the means to it. Our technology promises us ecstatic release. It is distancing and connective, enabling us to see something without touching it. It is essentially military in derivation and application. (Any special effects person will tell you the best computer animation is found in military training films, and that current animation techniques were developed at places like JPL.) Technology is also the face of science and of the future. In the '30s the future looked like streamlined spaceships; in the '50s, it was populated with atomic bombs and Freudian robots; '60s technology projected a future of computers; and current technology implies a future of simulation and force.

Science accounts for everything. Death becomes another simulable experience. We can approach it by jumping on a bed, by hooking up to a dying person's brainwaves, by pure acceleration. Death is inducible and retrievable by technology.



We retreat from the unknown. Facing the unknown implies the death of the self, for the self is constructed of what we know. Paradoxically, when the unknown or Unknowable is accounted for, we lose the ability to escape the self and become trapped in a completely defined personality, a cliché, a simulation of identity that is infinitely transformable and replaceable. We create our selves. We position death and the unknown within the created. There is no rupture of the known, hermetically sealed environment of science. Science explains everything.

Death, then, is merely an altered state. And we are grateful dead. The interest in perceptual states and the manipulation of sensory judgment flow from fringe activity in the '60s into mainstream mythology. Technicians who once took acid now produce mind-blowing special effects. Another, earlier motorcycle commercial for Kawasaki defined the connection a little too knowingly and was taken off the air after a brief run. In it, the cyclist's view of the scenery suddenly becomes psychedelic, changing color and streaking into a tunnel effect. The tag is, "Kawasaki. We know why you ride." The source of the imagery is still illicit, but the imagery itself is already ordinary.

#### INCIDENCE

The void of content at the center of special effects is filled with disparate details, lots and lots of them, distracting from the ground of emptiness. The general becomes particular, symbols become clichés. The clocks at the beginning of *Back to the Future* are overused symbols of time. We are surfeited by their symbolism and turn them back on themselves. They are very particular clocks — cat clocks with eyes that move, corny clocks, clocks made trivial. We laugh at their trivialization, catching our dead symbols in the act of zombielike resuscitation.

Characters flatten to the depth of cardboard — Obi-wan Kenobi, Darth Vader, Luke Skywalker — and we enjoy the caricature. We are relieved at the simplicity. Life must be simple to function quickly. We are moving out of a psychological age, but still have many of the trappings, and can only abuse them. We abuse our dying expectations with words like "clone" and "affectless," words from an obsolete vocabulary, terms that can only turn to blasphemy or ridicule, and then to trivia. Trivial psychological types, stretched to the broad proportions of cartoons, are easily read and provide a base for the special effects needed to enliven them.

#### TECHNE

"The actors are still the best special effects." "It's not the technology that limits what can be done, it's the people." Within both these statements by special effects technicians is a ready submission of the human to the technological. Everything can be tinkered with. Angelenos are

more inventive and less anchored when forming their personalities. They're more easily aware, for example, of Freudian psychology or the nuclear family as constructs. These are the trappings of home, brought here and recreated in a lovely Hollywood simulation or left behind, lost. The elements of the old culture do not hold, and the elements of this new one — the force of personality and the tinkering with nature — are anarchic, encouraging the invention of contexts but not the adherence to them. Skill is revered. Los Angeles is a town of practice, not theory.

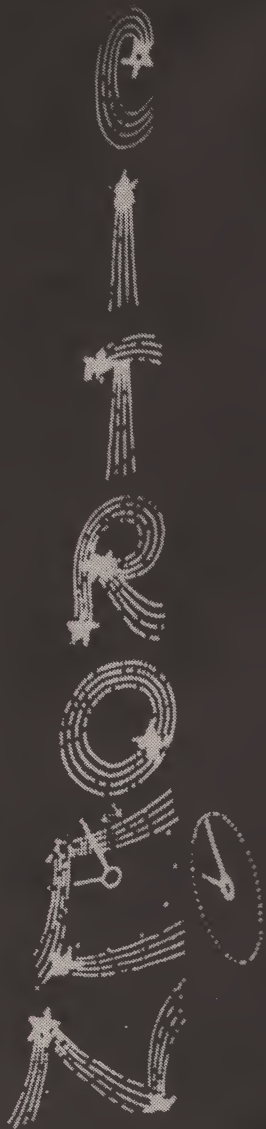
#### NEXT

Special effects are already on their way out in the commercial world. When every two-bit car agency has a chrome-glint logo, the original purpose of special effects, to catch the eye, is thwarted. We are advised that the next look of advertising will be a Tarkovskian, textured, mossy world of decay, collapse and nostalgia. □

*Special thanks to Jim Shaw for conversations on the topic of special effects.*



# June 18, 1925



The Eiffel Tower — which raises its imperious pylon above the capital — and advertising — that obsessive, tyrannical goddess — were destined to come together one day. It is even astonishing that their conjunction did not take place sooner. But it raised some rather serious difficulties. When approached about using “his” tower for commercial purposes, Eiffel answered: “I accept . . . with the condition that we begin with the towers of Notre Dame!”

The Exposition of Decorative Arts offered just such a pretext.

Was the gigantic tower alone to remain in darkness while all along the banks of the Seine wound a spectacle of light? An electrical engineer, Mr. Fernand Jacopozzi, a man of initiative and taste, proposed a project for illumination to the Exhibition Board. The considerable expense which it would entail was staggering. “What if I covered the costs with advertising?” suggested Jacopozzi. The idea provoked the indignation of the committee, as well as the Eiffel Tower Society and the city of Paris itself, which has the power of control for the society. But the originator of the idea did not accept defeat. He prepared a maquette, using a three-meter-high photo enlargement pierced with as many holes as there were to be lamps; an ingenious lighting system allowed one to imagine the effect which would be obtained. All the administrative and artistic committees trooped by the maquette and were captivated. After all, it was simply a matter of allowing a lavish patron to sign his name to the magnificent gift he was about to make . . . . It remained to find the patron. Jacopozzi immediately thought of one who had not hesitated to have the seven letters of the name of his firm traced in the sky by airplanes trailing plumes of smoke, or to recruit the Sahara itself to promote his automobiles. Mr. Andre Citroen accepted.

For several days now Parisians and fair-goers have been able to contemplate the results. It is a veritable luminous poem of nightly enchantment. Nine different lighting patterns, which the operators in the booth vary and blend at will, ceaselessly renew the spectacle with the play of their combinations. First the single silhouette of the tower, outlined by a simple garland of white lights, stands in profile against the darkness; then a shower of tiny sparkling stars descends from the top; next, an immense arabesque of the signs of the zodiac rushes down. Then, from the ridgepole of the tower bursts an enormous red flame, while on the pylons appear two shields of fire with the dates 1889-1925. The design changes again: Enormous white stars, formed by 600-watt bulbs, seem to be suspended between Heaven and Earth. Each one is soon embellished by a large golden tail, and they become comets. But a final artifice takes place: The cascading comet tails suddenly assume the shapes of letters and one can read, between the second and third platforms, C-I-T-R-O-E-N, while on the medallions of the two pylons the double chevrons which popularized the company replace the

dates.

As of this moment, just one side of the tower has been set aglow, but the hope is to accomplish the identical thing on the two other sides by the fourteenth of July. The Eiffel Tower, visible in the nightly gloom within a 100-km radius, will truly seem like the symbolic core of the City of Light. □

*Translated by Joan Hugo, from L'Illustration.*

## Carl Davis

Imagine the Eiffel Tower in the Paris night, flashing images and names, like the best of Broadway in the '20s or Las Vegas now. But bold images, numbers, letters, arcs and starbursts segue one into the other, cascading down and percolating up, transforming the Eiffel Tower into a pylon of light.

It really happened. From the Exposition des Arts Decoratifs in 1925 when it was lit, to Hitler's occupation of Paris when it was turned off, the Eiffel Tower was an enormous sign, advertising Citroen, France's largest automobile manufacturer. This envelopment of the symbol of France, the icon of technology, the premier tourist attraction of Paris, in sinews of electric lamps is startling, somehow curiously appropriate, and altogether humorous.

Neither sculpture nor architecture, the Eiffel Tower is a memorable shape, an archetypal object that has been the subject of many intellectual discourses. Roland Barthes declares the tower to be the ultimate signifier. A general nothing, which has neither exterior nor interior, nor any functional use, the tower has come to encapsulate all kinds of meanings. In “Vers un Architecture,” Le Corbusier attributes to the tower the poetry of pure structure, and thus a pure architecture. Artists in the early twentieth century seemed to find in it hidden structures and revealed dynamisms. The tower has a great solemnity. It is monumental.

However, wrap the tower in electric lights, and the socio-sacred monument, so full in its emptiness, is transformed. The static object is converted into a theater of object, where sequence and change speak the ultimate art of the twentieth century: Information Transformation. The tower becomes an enormous performance. The great attraction becomes the great transmitter.

It is humorous to visualize the Eiffel Tower dressed in a shift of light. At the 1925 Exposition, modernists were expounding the technological future. Le Corbusier had designed one of the fair's most admired pavilions. But the tower, icon of the futurists, was flashing an altogether different message. Jacopozzi had subverted the tower's iconicity and manifested another idea about the form of the future. Might not Duchamp have smiled? □







# STYLE AS SPECIAL EFFECT



stills from TV by Nadene Darck.

*Miami Vice is the highly popular television series in which two rather nattily dressed vice officers, one black and one white, hunt down various villains, in the form of drug dealers, illegal arms merchants and corrupt drug enforcement officials. Their exploits are played out against the exotic landscape of south Florida and Miami Beach, the current cocaine capital of the United States.*

*Highly popular, particularly among men and women between the ages of 18 and 35, Miami Vice has received considerable attention for the look of the show. The visual style of Miami Vice distinguishes it from anything now on television, except the commercials.*

*One of the people responsible for the look of the show is Jeffrey Howard, who joined the series after it was on the air. In many ways, this is just another cop show. Each week ruggedly handsome good guys prevail over the criminals with the usual amount of TV violence after the appropriate number of car chases. But in addition to the properly orchestrated genre elements, you also get Jeffrey Howard's handiwork, a television screen filled with images stylized to the point of cartoons — images that push at the boundaries of televisions reigning naturalism. This heightened, hyped-up naturalism, resembling super-realist painting, acts as a special effect, creating an image of reality outside of our normal experience. The following interview with Howard is about those images, their realization, their implications and the assumptions of one of their creators.*

—Joseph Di Mattia

**What were you working on before *Miami Vice*?**

It was preparation. I was doing nothing but commercials: banging them out, banging them out. I had done important things before that, *Altered States* and *Private Benjamin*, Las Vegas floor shows, television movies. I've been doing this for about ten years now. But this show was good; I was ready for it.

In retrospect, I was the right man at the right time, for them and for me. I was anxious to get out of commercials and into something with dramatic content, and I was interested in applying some of the techniques that have been developed in the last few years that have made the commercials more watchable than the television shows. That's the failure of television, that it doesn't compete with the commercials anymore. The content doesn't even compete: you can actually make people cry in thirty seconds, like they did in the Olympics, with those commercials where they really sort of tugged at you, and with the visual things you can do in post production — computer enhancement, etc. . . .

I'm excited about *Miami Vice* because I think it's going to present a breakthrough for art direction. It's suddenly going to become known that it's a different ballgame. We have to be very

sharp, very clever; we have to be captivating. It's kind of dangerous because at bottom, it is very commercial. That reminds me of Isamu Noguchi's reaction to the work of Eiko, the photographer, the art director. He was in awe of her talent, but there was also the reservation about the use of this kind of talent.

**I noticed there's no television in your house.**

I didn't watch television for four years, but I was in editing rooms and at screenings, and I saw things come together. I had that commercial background. I also had the background of being a painter, an artist, and I have been able to give the show a special look because I am aware of new trends in visual language.

We've had a revolution in visual language in the last ten years. *Miami Vice* is just part of the whole series of cultural developments, like the resurgence in painting, the development of post-modern architecture, the phenomenon of the post-modern altogether. What does it mean? It means an eclecticism about historical experience and its application to our present condition, in a playful way. It's about the way we live. It's about creativity in a lighter vein, not the Apollonian creativity of the '50s and '60s. I'm reminded of going to see Foucault at USC. He gave a talk and took questions from the audience. This guy with punkish pink hair, tattoos, shaved, and an Oscar Wildeian garb stood up and asked, "M. Foucault, how can we save ourselves from being objectified in this world?" And Foucault said the answer was plain coming from this kid, and the answer was appropriate. You have to develop your perception, put your stamp on your immediate surroundings. This is advice from a philosopher. You could see its evidence in the kid.

Our show is about that sensibility. We live in a grab-bag environment and it's good to stir things up and not listen to the same songs all the time. I brought this fringe language into the show, in paintings that I have used, in artists whose work I've used, and in my own conception and production of the sets. Even if it's something as boring as a hospital scene, it's going to be a hospital room that you're never going to forget. This is my attitude now: don't ever commit anything boring to film, nothing mundane. If it's going to show, it's going to be exaggerated.

Film is a visual medium, and it has been relentlessly narrative for a long time. While we'll never lose a kind of literary narrative, we have to find out what else it's about. This show, for me, is like taking a poem and making it into a song. The poem is twisted around and committed to music and you have a totally different experience. That's the way I treat reality. Our scripts tend to sound like they came out of a police file, which they have. Still, I want to push it over the top, make it almost like a cartoon. That's when I enjoy watching the show the most, when it's like a very, very slick cartoon.



## Jeffrey Howard, art director of *Miami Vice*, interviewed by Joseph Di Mattia

Do you and Michael Mann agree about certain elements of stylization?

Yes. To give you an example, I was talking with Michael the other day about the two-hour New York show that's coming up [aired July 28, 1985]. We were going over locations together. When I get a script, I'll start immediately pulling together research photographs, things that I can use to communicate what I would like to do with the show. A synthetic process takes place in my mind: I make this big stew of elements that I think will work in the show, and then orchestrate them. I went through a book called *Rooftop New York*, which had some fabulous photographs of Deco buildings at the top, with these great, massive heads, a very fascistic kind of architecture. You can see a couple of D.E.A. agents meeting up there. But by doing that, we cut a very narrow path through New York. We avoid a lot. We're very careful about what we put on, because we don't want to break this closed environment that we've created, this dramatic fantasy about life on the edge of respectability, a little bit too close to danger, about selling out in order to get there.

We are very topical with the show, and cocaine is, in a funny way, a good metaphor for problems in America. God, that sounded awful — like Jerry Falwell. There is a connection there, especially when you see that our own country is using drugs as leverage. We use that in our show as well. It's about venality, it's about selling out. In a funny way, the show laughs at itself, because we just swim around in the glamour.

Cocaine is such a funny drug. Why has it become so popular? I talk with Columbians for whom cocaine is a recreational drug. And, of course, cocaine is used as a party drug here in America, too. But I seem to hear more stories of cocaine used as a work drug in America, especially in Hollywood. I've met many people who use it to get the job done. What does that say about what makes this country tick? Why? It can't be stopped, it cannot be stopped.

In Miami cocaine is a major part of the environment. It's part of the skyline. It's laundered money that has paid for the boutiques and the restaurants. It's changed the city and people begrudgingly accept that. And it's dumbfounding to sit at a Denny's across from a D.E.A. agent who could be a dead man tomorrow. He was laundering money, they found him out, there's a mark out on him, there's a contract out on him. They have automatic machine guns, and that's it . . . he's gone.

I didn't realize that your story-lines were in fact based on cases and were so grounded in the city of Miami.

You must remember the show was created in part by the people involved with *Hill Street Blues*. The funny thing is that our show could not be farther from *Hill Street Blues*, which has all that gritty police detail. Every week you're knee

deep in it. Ours is almost a romanticized version, except that the show is too cool to be romantic. We want to get away from a slavish devotion to reality. That bores me. I don't want to know about mundane things. I want to know about experimental things. I have a chance to make the kind of TV that I would consider worth watching.

Visually compelling . . .

With a mark on it. There's going to be something about the lighting, the mood, that's going to arrest you. Make you think about it. I'm talking about total design. We've been very strict in what we do. We've eliminated everything that was ever made before 1920. We're never in a building that was built before 1920. That's it: after the Armory show.

One of the reasons that people watch *Dynasty* and *Dallas* is that they're so kitschy. That's why they're infectious. I watched *Hollywood Wives* every night. But we also need something else. We need something that is going to make us look at our environment more closely. On our show, we're looking at our environment very closely and we're commenting on it. We're offering that sensibility to our audience: "Look at what's around you," or maybe, "Look at what you haven't seen around you."

Marquez' *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* tells a story that has happened many times over, and yet it happened this time in a very peculiar way. Something about the event, something about the details, something about the way the birds flew over his head and shit on his coat. It's a reality that is almost aglow with a hallucinogenic energy. We manipulate the environment; we also tell people how environments are manipulated.

The show cuts across the demographic spectrum.

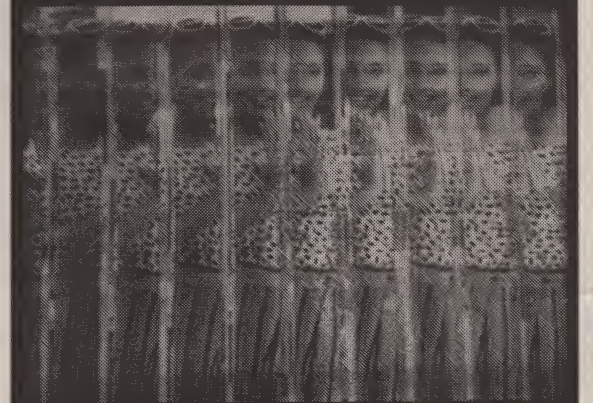
It does. The music, of course, brings it across. This kind of show is the successor to the Broadway musical, which was the successor to the Italian opera. This kind of format is going to change television.

The music we use is probably the most memorable American art form, in terms of mass culture. It overshadows everything. It communicates to people in a way nobody could have dreamt of. To tie it in is that whole Wagnerian trip, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

The coolness of it is an intriguing idea. The show has almost an ironic tone.

Exactly. We're commenting on the environment by what we choose. Then we're offering the same invitation people who watch our show to comment on it, not to take it for granted.

How do you merge that irony with the genre elements?







A catalyst for the burgeoning importance of art direction on television, NBC's *Miami Vice* has been heralded as redefining the look of a TV series and criticized for using its gloss to cover the absence of plot and content.

*Miami Vice* is a milestone for the visually oriented, fashion-conscious '80s. Its postmodern pinks and greens surge through the airwaves with such velocity as to be identifiable even on a black-and-white set. The show maneuvers through a maze of trend traps: fashion, music, drugs, chic men and women and architecturally trendy sets.

Producer Michael Mann has finally managed, as one critic put it, "to place an existential hero in a city built on greed, a 20th-century perversion of the American Dream." He has chosen to subvert plot in order to create a world for his characters. But one doesn't have time to wonder about the plot while watching the visual cotton candy swirling in the small screen of the television.

—Liese Gardner

For example, I did a counterfeiting operation with real plates, real counterfeit money. We started out the show, the counterfeit operation, in a Deco ballroom. The script comes in, it doesn't say "counterfeit operation, high tech, in Deco ballroom." It says "back room of a laundry" or something. What can we do to make this more interesting? I saw the FBI photos of this operation: it's dull, it's boring. I built this crazy system that only a maniac would have done.

In another show, we had some guys who were buying legal weapons, and we wanted to show the kill power of these weapons. They were Mack 10s, a really lethal throw-away gun. For \$2,000, you get an automatic pistol that fires about forty rounds in ten seconds with a silencer. It's a basic depersonnel weapon. . . . Selling these things . . . So the director says, "We can't have them firing into water; let's use mannequins, let's use real high-tech mannequins, you know, Cadillac fire-miss metallic mannequins with this beautiful space grid inside a blimp hanger." Now we're talking. Now we're out of the warehouse.

And that's the idea — anything's possible. One of the main messages in our show is: "Don't be gullible. There's a lot of weird shit out there. Be forewarned. Don't take anything for granted. Be cool." It's that feeling of moving through a world that could collapse. The show has a nuclear age feeling about it, a nuclear age darkness. Where we live, we try and move smoothly through the tested waters. The people with the most grace and elegance are the people you tip your hat to.

**If the show is based on actual incidents, yet you have a highly stylized look, what, then, is the emerging message?**

You know, we really are reflecting what's happening in the larger world in this show. We show a more rarefied part of it, the part that you've maybe only seen in the most exclusive fashion magazines. But we bring out a fascination with the material world. That's why Deco is so powerful. Deco architecture was utopian: objects were friendly, objects were intimate, there was even a kind of obsession with objects. Now we have this in our show too, with our cars, our clothes, our houses. That's a reflection of the way the American dream is being lived to the limit now by these drug dealers.

The obsession in our show with surface detail is the obsession of a demon that we're exposing. There are some mixed messages going on. On the one hand, we're getting people to buy more clothes, buy cars — it's a great show to advertise on, when you think about it. The material world

is with us. I hear it's more popular than *Monday Night Football* with 25-to-35-year-olds.

**So the messages are mixed . . . ?**

Yes, I think so, but that's the beauty of it.

**The show seems to glamorize this whole . . .**

. . . the smuggler's life. There is definitely some of that. There is a tip of the hat, in the same way we would to Lee Iacocca. We pay homage to these guys, and I think probably rightfully so.

**The world is corrupt . . .**

We use visual sophistication in two ways. In our bad guys we use it as an example of gluttony. It's the dead end of wealth. Here a man amassed all this money, God knows how many people he fucked up because of it, and what has he got to show for it? A million-dollar coffee table made of marble, lapis lazuli and gold.

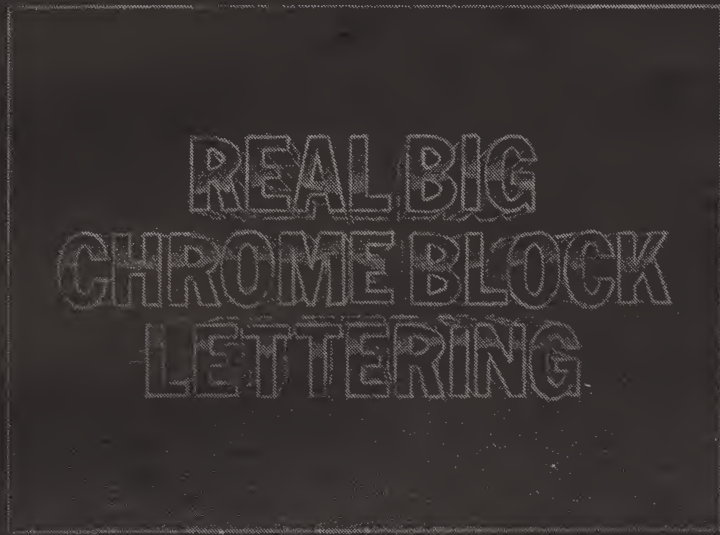
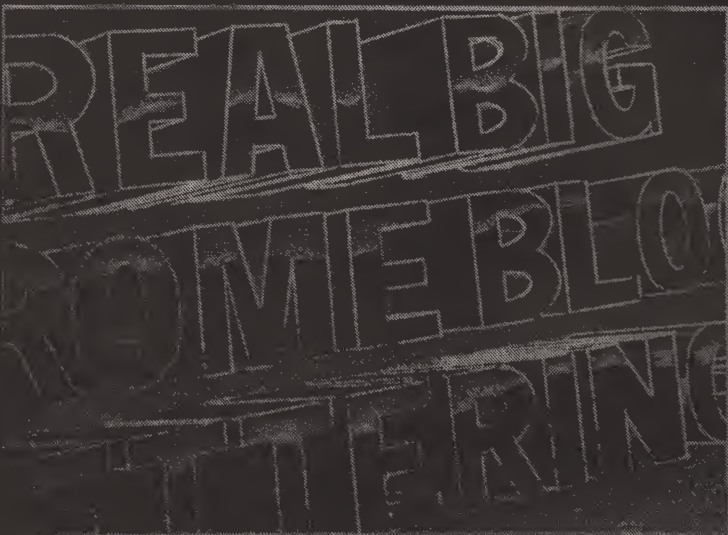
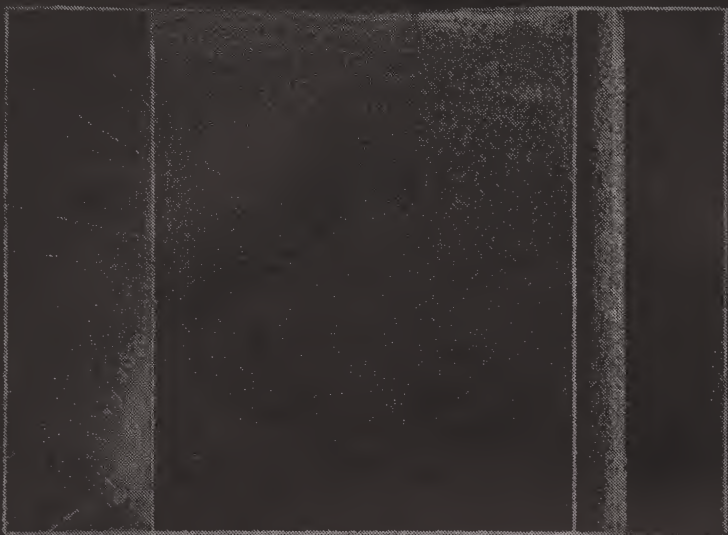
**And the good guys?**

The good guys, they have a well-designed Italian coffee table, no lapis lazuli. [Laughs.] No, I think we're trying to teach a little intelligence about the environment. Because ultimately it has a political ramification. We are what we eat, we are what we live in, we are what we buy. I think there is a vindication for this use of wealth and glamour in our show.

That brings me back to Noguchi's reaction to Eiko's work. It was so seductive. The world was art directed. You could not travel to a corner of the world that wasn't art directed. Noguchi was afraid of that, afraid of all the chaos that we'd lost. The formlessness would be lost. He thought it was too seductive. Our show is very seductive in that way. It invites you to step into a commercial. But it's more than that.

Of course, many shows play on you like that. *Dallas* invites you like that, *Dynasty*. I think the important difference in our show is that it's playful. You can talk about how it's seducing people into thinking that nothing else is important other than cars and clothes, but I don't think that's it. I think that our product is the living example of how we can work with our environment, how we can art direct our world. □







# SUPERFACTS

## Joseph Nechvatal

It is a well-worn cliché that we live in the era of overload. The optimistic view might be that we've reached a new and higher level of symbol density and we are now able to combine many individual symbols into complex relationships, or chunks, of information which can then be treated as a single megasymbol. The result: higher intelligence in an ever increasingly sensitized populace.

The pessimistic view of our present situation might be that we have been bombarded with a barrage of information from the overloaded image bank to the point of overkill, resulting in a stupidly complacent society of de-sensitized robots. Mind boggled, we blunder towards our own annihilation, blindly led down the garden path by fear and the power of overload. Cute.

Can both of these perspectives be true? Are we simultaneously funny and sad? Are our layers of meaning woven or crushed? On this point I'm scared but optimistic.

I've been looking at overload in a new way. I no longer believe in the world. The image bank is the vast impersonal mind which we think of as God, and we live in the twilight of the gods. With overload, our new cruel overlord, we live in a kind of visual and mental uncertainty analogous to that loss of meaning Zen calls satori. I know I'm treading a fine line here, but if you believe, as I do, that to become one with God one has not to renounce anything but one's self, then the information glut both causes and relieves our present spiritual catastrophe. Chaos is the earliest state of disorganized creation. We are blindly being impelled towards the creation of a new order of hidden meanings. Overload embraces all opposing forces in a state of undifferentiated dissolution. End result? End of the world or end of the world order.

We live in the land of dreamy dreams. The moody transparency of our times both calls out for and denies our post-industrial overlord. We tremble with anticipation before its judgment. Believing in information is like believing in the Judeo-Christian God; you just have to believe in things you can't see.

It's no wonder that we are sleepwalking our way into the future, into the information age. With the collapse of meaning, we can benefit from a system which we know to be corrupt. Information is a girl for men to play with, a swooning spirit which wavers in the ecstasy of bliss, in the excess of unbelievable knowledge.

Information is not knowledge. Knowledge is not wisdom. Wisdom is not beauty. Information is not truth. Hmmm.

If you believe in overload as I now do, you will be alone. You will be surrounded by darkness and silence, and, in that moment, tenderly transformed. This is the way into the city of woe. This is the way of the forsaken people.

You may have raised your voice here in protest and alarm, but it is ineffectual, consumed by

overload and spat back at your face as harmless platitudes. Overload is smooth and slick. Overload has a Teflon president. Overload is the processed world. Scary? Overload is smart and ruthless. So let yourself go. We may be info Moonies, toads on a rose, but at the same time we are free. The fetishism of factuality no longer pumps the nation. We float on the flood of tears. As for myself, I sell the shadow.

Look at the basic values of our society, the passivity of the people in a time of cold pure war. Overload deals with the disorders and disillusionments of our time. Never conventional, grossly sentimental, clumsy, or intentionless, overload services us with a high-tech mechanical dance of razzmatazz. Id? Superego? Ego? Forget it. Overload addresses the ideological contents of our time through the most mechanical way possible, devouring the social, neutral world in its own language.

This morning I had to tell myself that I am part of the universe and that I have a right to be here. Overload gave me a haughty look and settled back onto the sofa where it was polishing its fingernails and watching a movie on television. It was studying to be a secretary. □

Joseph Nechvatal, *Maleficarum*, 1984. Courtesy of Gallery Nature Morte ►







# CONTEMPORARY PSYCHO-STYLES

## Bruce D. Rhodewalt

I was a game show geek.

I made a fool of myself in front of millions of people.

For \$14,050. And a La-Z-Boy Reclina-Rocker. And a lifetime supply of Mazola No Stick.

It isn't really anything I'm embarrassed about — since it was *Jeopardy!* (they always spell it with an exclamation mark, the Rolls-Royce of game shows), and since I won — but I know why they paid me so much just to answer a few questions (or question a few answers, as the *Jeopardy!* people might say). They, like all game show producers, are running a freak show, and, for three days, I was the 100-pound rat of Sumatra.

What people look for in game shows is the same thing they seek from Prince Herman, the three-legged man at the carnival: something more ridiculous and unusual than they can get from real life. They want to see normally shy and innocent young girls, just like the girl who married dear old dad, girls who, once they get nestled in the power chair on *The Dating Game*, have the nerve to ask a complete stranger *what kind of fruit* he most resembles. Or couples about the same age as the Harvens down the street, willing to dress as bees, hillbillies and washing machines and jump up and down and wave signs for the chance to "Make a Deal" with Monty Hall. Or entire families, like the Melendrezes from Monterey Park, whose members are happy to appear onstage with Richard Dawson, knowing, if they're women, that they'll have to *kiss* the slimy lech, in the hopes of winning money on *Family Feud*.

This is all very embarrassing and unusual, so game shows are eager to find people who will do these stupid things. But there is another, more subtle, form of humiliation. If you aren't willing to run around and shout but just happen to know lots of junk, you can make money as an egghead. It is, in fact, much more lucrative, especially if you do it right.

After all, just about anybody would get excited and jump up and down after winning thousands of dollars on TV; there's nothing particularly freakish about that. But how many people do you run into who know what the northernmost island in the world is, *and* what the Russian word for "union" is, *and* what three rhyming prefixes each mean "half" (hemi, demi and semi), *and* what the chemical symbol for hydrogen peroxide is? *And* can name all these things under the pressure of real-time TV taping, surrounded by garish lights and 30 video monitors, *and* can do all of it while remaining cool enough to crack hilarious jokes?

I did all those things. I had the time of my life doing them, too (even though this wasn't exactly like the *Jeopardy!* I worshipped as a kid, with Art Fleming and Don Pardo). So don't get me wrong.

But I blew it. I was not a perfect *Jeopardy!* contestant. I could have won lots more. I did not

really play the game right. I should have studied. Memorized state capitals. Read Bartlett's.

And I should have made up more stuff about myself than I did. The people behind the show would have practically *fed* me the answers to keep me winning if I had been a more perfect contestant.

I'd like you to meet my hero, the ultimate quiz-show contestant:

His name is John Kirkpatrick. He grew up in North Carolina or West Virginia. He was an Eagle Scout, and once saved the life of a neighbor boy, Pete Hesty, who knocked himself unconscious diving into the low end of the YMCA pool. When he was 18, he joined the Air Force. Two years later, he went to college, possibly Yale or SMU, where in five years he got his bachelor's degree in electrical engineering, met and married a lovely girl from New Hampshire named Elizabeth, earned a master's degree in English, bought a house, got an aviator's license, and started up a little consulting business at home. He is a volunteer fireman, collects butterflies, rebuilds Nashes in his spare time, and this summer he's taking a sailing course at the junior college. He and Elizabeth have two kids and a golden retriever named Eddie.

John gets nearly every answer he attempts, in categories ranging from Football to Physics, leaning into the microphone just slightly whenever he speaks. He misses a \$200 question in the Rock 'n' Roll column, and stays away from that subject afterward. He is immaculately polite, saying "please" every time he requests another question. He has a very corny sense of humor. Every woman who sees the show falls in love with him, and so do some of the men. His competitors are actually honored to be beaten by him.

And he wins over and over and over, amassing nearly \$100,000, which he claims he will use towards his children's education.

This is the kind of mental freak quiz-show makers are looking for, steely pillars who have a godlike capacity for knowledge, patience, energy and time. Sort of an amalgam of Thomas Jefferson, Ray Kroc and Jesus. But that's not me. With my dyed-red butch, my smart-ass replies to host Alex Trebek's predictable patter, and my piddling sum, I obviously didn't have what it took.

I have an idea. I'm going to take my meager winnings and start a little business, maybe call it "Kirk's Kwiz-Show Konsultants," and teach people how to win like John. I'll tell them to buy an encyclopedia and get a proper haircut, and we'll make up stories about wives and dogs and kids and North Carolina. And I'll get a cut of their earnings, before taxes, and use it to start up my own show, with no celebrities, no gimmicks and no kissing, and I'll bring Art Fleming and Don Pardo back together for all time. □

Following 3-D pages: ►

Ray Zone, *3-D Towers* 13

Ray Zone, *Bicameral Perceptions* 14

James Turrell, *Roden Crater* (detail), 1984 15

Daniel Martinez, *Urban Extermination* 16

Jim Pomeroy, *High Technology Stocks and Bonds and Cultural Reflections*, from *Reading Lessons and Eye Exercises*, University of California at Riverside, 1985 18

Brad deGraf and Brad Hunt, still from computer-animated 3-D film created by Digital Productions for Hitachi Ltd. The film was produced for the Psukuba Exposition in Japan. All images in the film are computer-generated.

Robert Williams, *Rods A-Poppin'* 20







# BICAMERAL PERCEPTION

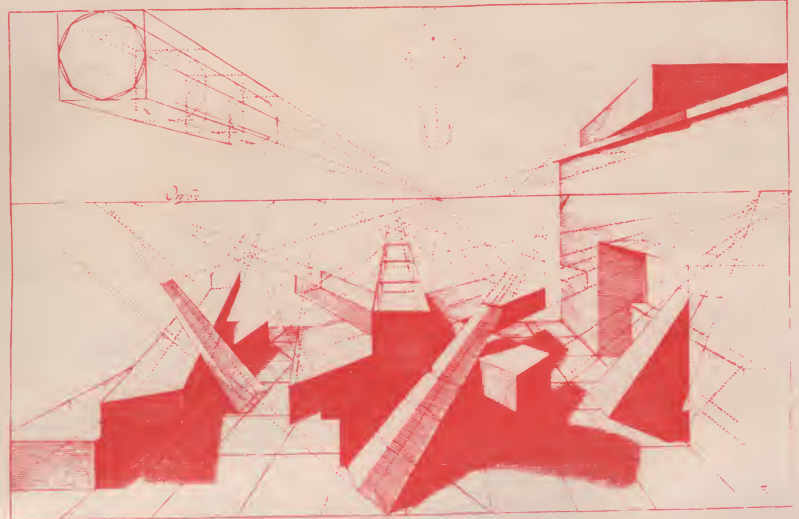
## An Inventory of 3-D Effects

by Ray Zone

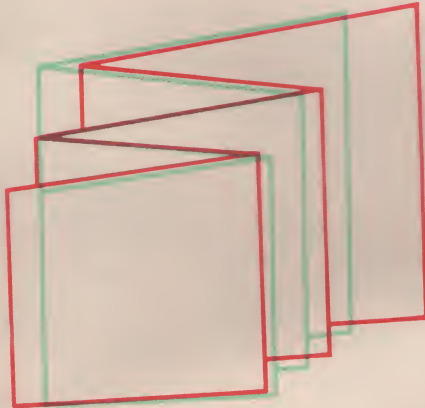
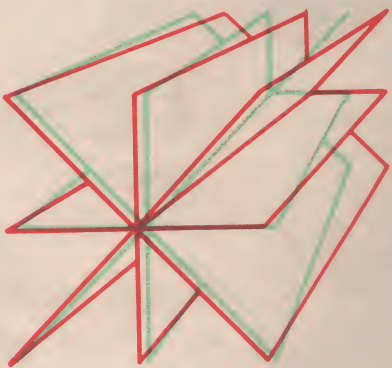
① Looking at the world with two forward-facing eyes, we simultaneously perceive two disparate images. This binary pair accounts for stereopsis, the perception of depth.



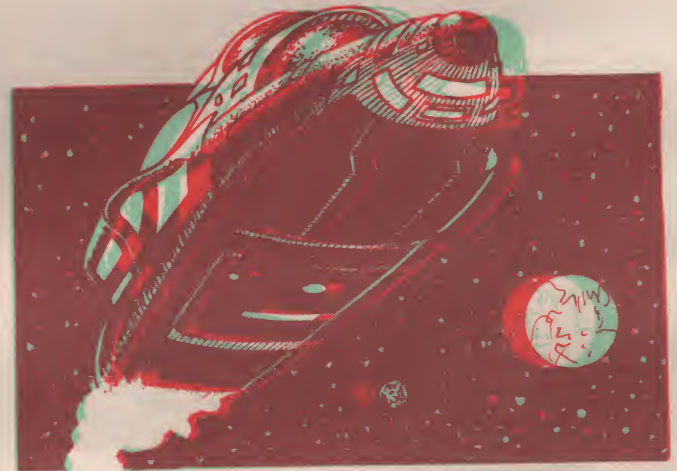
JAN VREDEMAN de VRIES PERSPECTIVE DRAWING



② Western art has made use of a scientific method of spatial representation called perspective. Perspective is monocular depth, an art for one eye. Thus it fails.



③ Sir Charles Wheatstone, inventor of the stereopticon, devised the first 3-D images in 1838, simple geometric drawings that effectively convey stereoscopic relief.



④ With 3-D our eyes look through a stereoscopic window. The window effect breaks the panel to dramatize depth with emerging images.



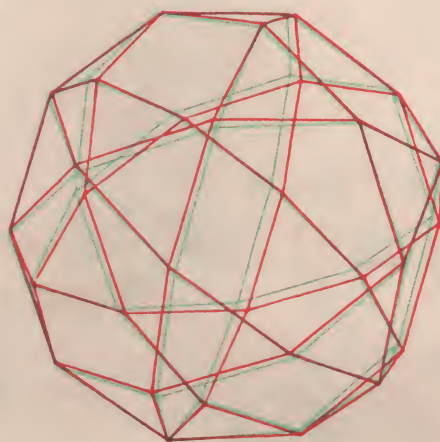
⑤ Hyperstereo extends space by spreading the distance between the two eyes.



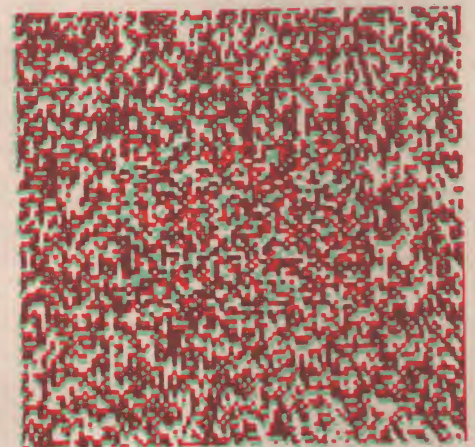
⑥ Cartoon art in 3-D is tactile. Hard edge art is abrupt interfacing between surfaces and emptiness.



⑦ Retinal rivalry utilizes conflicting imagery in a stereo pair. A kind of iridescent, visual flicker results.



⑧ 3-D imaging has come full circle from Wheatstone's time. Stereo images are now being generated on computers.



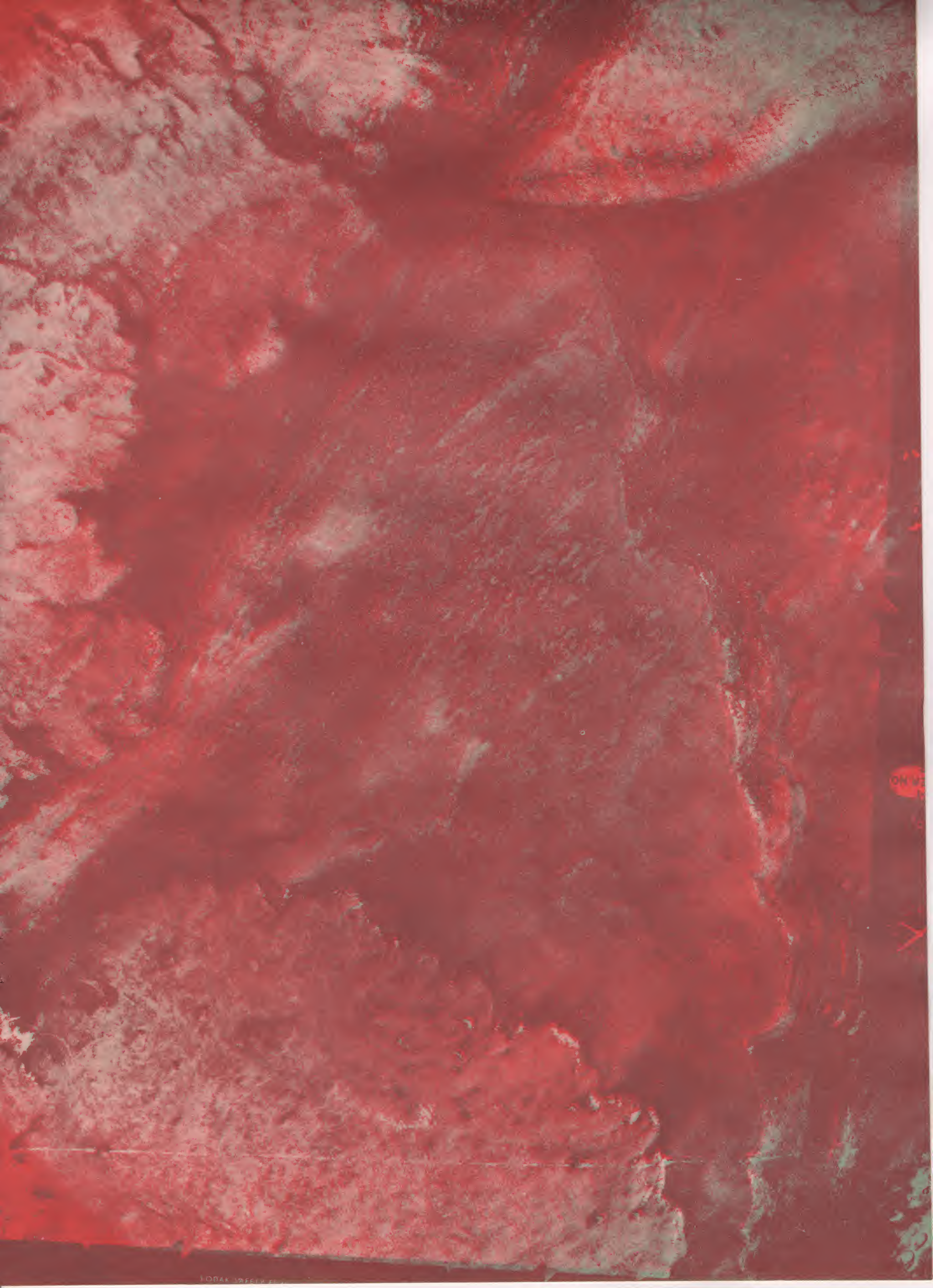
⑨ In 1959 Bela Julesz generated the random dot stereogram which has no monocular depth or familiarity cues but is nevertheless a 3-D image.

### References

1. Macrosterio photo by Tony Alderson. Copyright 1985 by Tony Alderson.
2. Perspective Drawing by Jan Vredeman de Vries.
3. Arthur Chandler and Wayne Pope, *Stereo Views*, San Francisco; Troubador Press, 1978.
- 4 & 6. Panel from *Three-Dimensional Alien Worlds* published by Pacific Comics. Art by John Bolton, Copyright 1985 by Bruce Jones.

5. Aerial Stereo of Empire State Building, Keystone View Company.
7. Crystal stereogram by A. Judge. Copyright 1985 by Chapman and Hall.
8. Computer stereogram by Richard Ogle. Copyright 1985 by Richard Ogle.
9. Bela Julesz, *Foundations of Cyclopean Perception*, University of Chicago Press; Chicago, 1971.









DAVID J. MARTINEZ

"YOU DEVILS, MEET





**YOUR MAKER"**

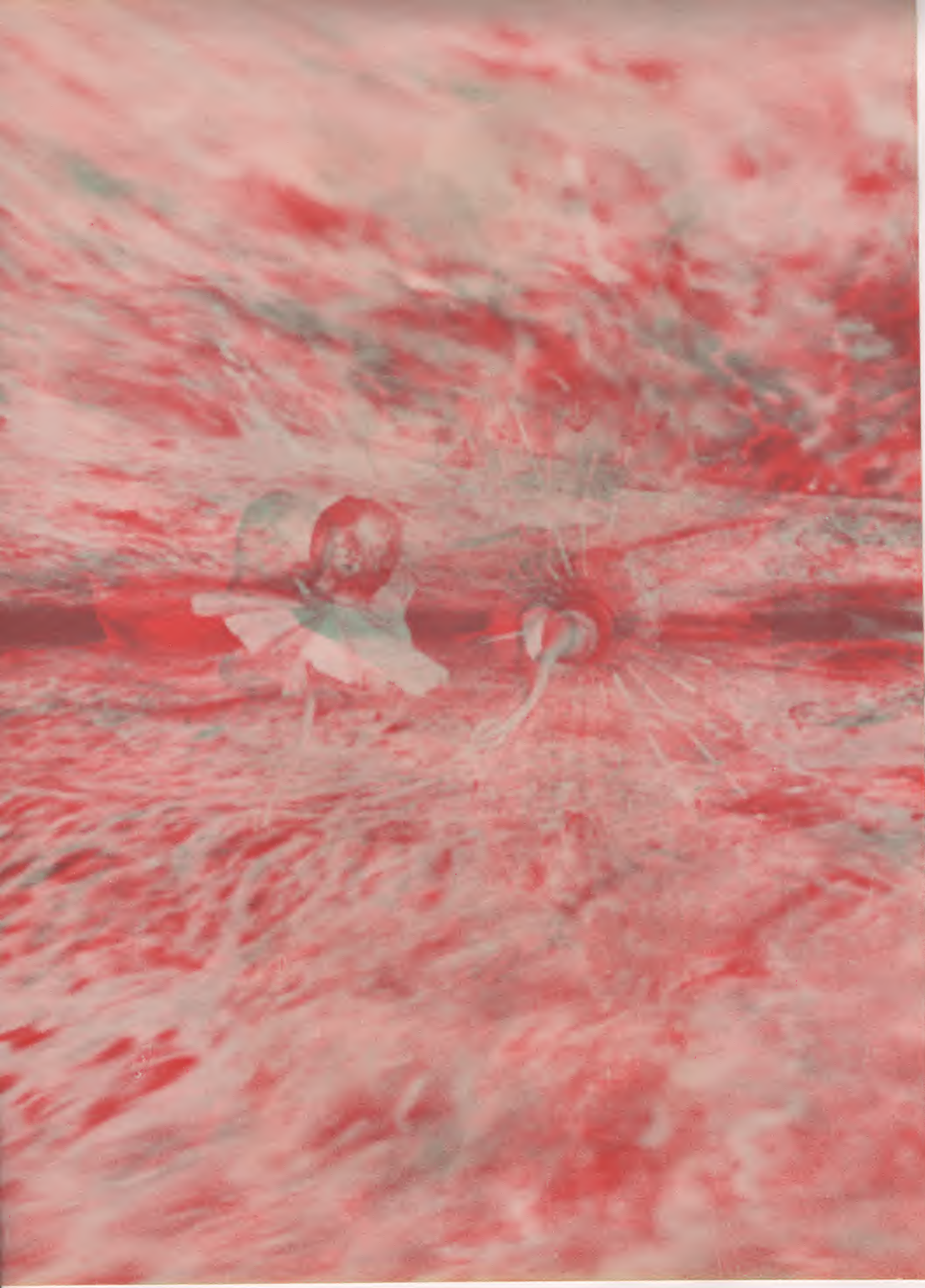
**John Wayne**



THE REFLEXIVE EFFECTS & FUNCTIONAL INVERSION IN A PRIVATIZED SPECTACLE.













# NEED

**John Stepling** I couldn't tell if this skinny kid was in line. When I asked him he turned and looked at me; "Oh yeah, well?" I supposed that meant he was in line. He didn't carry a box so probably he was a detox, not a maintenance client. The clinic called their addicts "clients." If you were on indefinite "maintenance" then you were given a little metal box with a small lock for your "take-home" bottles of methadone. The skinny kid turned back around, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. The guy in front of him was a fat Mexican with "macho" tattooed on the underside of his forearm. He'd helped me jump-start my car once about two years ago. He had an ugly old lady named Yolanda who was also on the program. I could hear Jerry laughing from behind the partition. Jerry took urine samples, he was the "P-man" and he laughed a lot. He was the only black on the staff at the clinic so the few black clients seemed to make it a point to laugh with him. It was the skinny kid's turn at the window and right away he starts in arguing with the dispensing nurse. This morning it was Cheri, a thin sinewy woman in her late forties who chewed her nails. Cheri was not ready to fuck around with this kid. If you've been on the program awhile you find that it's pointless to complain; you're the one who is addicted, you're the one who *needs*. If things don't always go logically, well, that's the way it is when you're coming from a position of weakness. Cheri gave the kid his dose, it looked like 40 milligrams. He grumbled some and left. I stepped up to the window. Cheri knew me and knew my dosage so she didn't have to open the book. She put extra Tang in my cup, just the way I like. Outside I saw the skinny white kid standing up against a palm tree. I was walking toward him and I could see he was going to say something to me. "Hey," he said out of the side of his mouth. I nodded back. "You want to buy one?" I looked at him but didn't say anything. I couldn't think of anything to say except no. "No," I said. "Thirty bucks for forty mikes," he said, nodding at me. I'd never heard anyone call methadone dosage "mikes" before. I kept looking at him and made him nervous. I saw he was maybe eighteen or nineteen, and he had thin wispy childlike hair. "Well?" he asked. "Want to buy any?" I said I didn't. "Whatever," he said and turned away. After a second he turned back, "You know anybody here wants to buy a bottle?" I told him I didn't, but he could keep asking, there was probably someone who did. The kid nodded, satisfied with this answer.

Around five that afternoon I stopped by Penny's. The apartment where Penny and Jim lived was south of Olympic near Vermont. Penny was a black transvestite with severely crossed eyes who was living with Jim, an ex-Marine auto mechanic now working as a "Mr. Goodwrench." Jim hated all of Penny's dope-fiend friends, so I never went over after six-thirty when Jim was home. Penny got his disability check around this time each month. I knocked and Penny let me in. Seated on the sofa with his shirt off was the skinny white kid. I could tell Penny had been blowing him. "This is Darryl," Penny said to me. "Hi," I said. The kid, Darryl, lit a Kool from a pack on the table in front of the couch. "Weren't you at the clinic, man?" Darryl asked. "Yeah," I said, "I was there." Penny mussed Darryl's hair from in back of the sofa. Darryl kept looking at me. "Can you get us something?" Penny whined. I said I guessed that I could. I said Johnny probably had something but I wouldn't guarantee how good it was. "What's that mean?" Darryl asked. I didn't say anything. I just looked over at Penny: "You want me to call him?" "Yes," Penny said, "tell him eighty dollars, will he do that?" I said he would, he'd make up a package for whatever amount you wanted. Darryl got up and paced back and forth in front of the living room window. Penny watched him, grinning. I called Johnny. I didn't really know why I was doing this because I didn't want any junk. I guess I could explain to myself that the ten dollar "fee" I would skim was worth the trouble, though I knew that wasn't really it. Johnny answered, a thin petulant voice that sent out ripples of paranoia. As I talked Darryl stood by the window watching me. He had put on his shirt and was methodically rolling up the sleeves. His eyes were pale blue and wary, but they were not the eyes of junk sickness. After I hung up Penny asked if Johnny would do it. "Yeah," I said, "he'll meet me around the corner in forty-five minutes." Before Darryl could add something there was a knock at the door. Penny hurried over to look through the peephole. "Oh, Carl." Penny opened the door and planted a kiss on Carl's purple lips. "Baby, how are you?" Penny asked, drawing out the word "are." Carl was a stocky black man with an ageless unlined face and huge muscular arms. He winked at Darryl who quickly looked away. I had only met Carl twice before, both times at Penny's old apartment on Argyle. He was a speed freak and walked with that edge of vertigo that singles out the type. "Hey man," Carl said to me. "Hey," I answered, and smiled. Darryl had taken a seat on the end of the couch and lit another Kool. He looked uneasy and avoided looking at Carl. I wished I hadn't agreed to cop for Penny and this kid, I wanted to get up and leave. Carl had brought something with him into the room, a feeling of failure and sickness, and the smell of chemically released rage.

I stood looking up the block, waiting for Johnny's green Camaro to turn the corner. Another reason I didn't like this was that Johnny always made you wait. Most connections did, but Johnny had it down to a science. When I left Penny's, Carl had the kid cornered on the couch talking at him about how such a handsome kid should use those looks to get himself a little stable of bitches. "The game," Carl said, "the game is the purest form of action. The *real* player, see, the righteous *real* player is a



man who keeps his dick in his pocket, right next to the currency . . . you dig?" Johnny's green Camaro appeared at the end of the block. He drove slowly and pulled over in front of the driveway to Penny's apartment. I gave him the seventy dollars through the car window and at the same time he dropped two balloons from his mouth into my open hand. "Later," he said and pulled the Camaro slowly into the street and then turned right at the corner. I stood holding the balloons, wet with Johnny's saliva; a green balloon and an orange balloon. I rolled them between my palms, feeling the moistness and the hard caked powder inside.

When I got back to Penny's there was someone there who I didn't know. A tall black man wearing Cassell sunglasses and a green doubleknit leisure suit. Penny said his name was Donald. I saw he had a book on his lap, a worn paperback copy of *I Ain't Much Baby, but I'm All I've Got*. "Good book?" I asked. "Say what?" "The book," I said, pointing to it. "Yeah, it's good," Donald said, his Cassells tilting up in my direction. I went with Darryl and Penny into the bathroom. Penny closed the lid on the toilet and sat down. He untied the balloons and emptied the heroin onto a mirror. Darryl stood next to him and I stood next to Darryl. I could hear Darryl's heavy breathing. Penny didn't like to fix himself so usually I did it for him. "You want to do him?" I asked Darryl. "No, uh, I'd rather you did it, man." Darryl said, "In fact, you know, ah, maybe you could do me, too, you know?" His face looked tight, the pale eyes uncertain. He licked his lips with a tongue tinted tin-yellow. Penny was already cooking up the dope in a charred bottle cap. As he put it down on the pink tiles of the sink he was rolling up a tiny ball of cotton with his free hand. Darryl watched intently as Penny dropped the cotton ball into the hot brown liquid. He handed me the syringe and an insulin kit, and then wrapped the terrycloth belt of his bathrobe around his arm at the bicep. I could see the vein in Penny's brown arm bulge up. Darryl said "shit" under his breath, but I couldn't tell why. Penny gave a kind of half giggle as I probed the vein with my thumb. I found it with the first try. A bolt of red filling up the plastic cylinder of the syringe. I pushed in the plunger, forcing dope into his vein. I could tell it was great dope; Penny smiled immediately and a visible wave of nausea and warm well-being washed over him simultaneously. I cleaned out the syringe, squirting the bloody water into the corner on purpose. Penny lit a Kool. "How is it?" asked Darryl. "It's go-o-o-od," Penny said softly and leaned over to kiss Darryl lightly on the neck. Penny cooked up the second balloon and I drew up the heroin through the same cotton. Darryl looked at me, his face blank. He pushed his hair away from his face. "All right," he said. "Okay," I said, "let Penny tie you off." Penny wrapped the terrycloth belt around Darryl's skinny arm. It was harder to find a vein on the kid's arm and it took three tries before any blood registered in the syringe. I pushed in the plunger and then withdrew the needle. A little pool of blood formed in the joint of his arm. Penny sopped it up with a wad of toilet paper. "How is it?" Penny asked. "Okay," the kid said, his eyes closed. "Okay, okay." I put the syringe on the counter. "You clean it," I said and left the room.

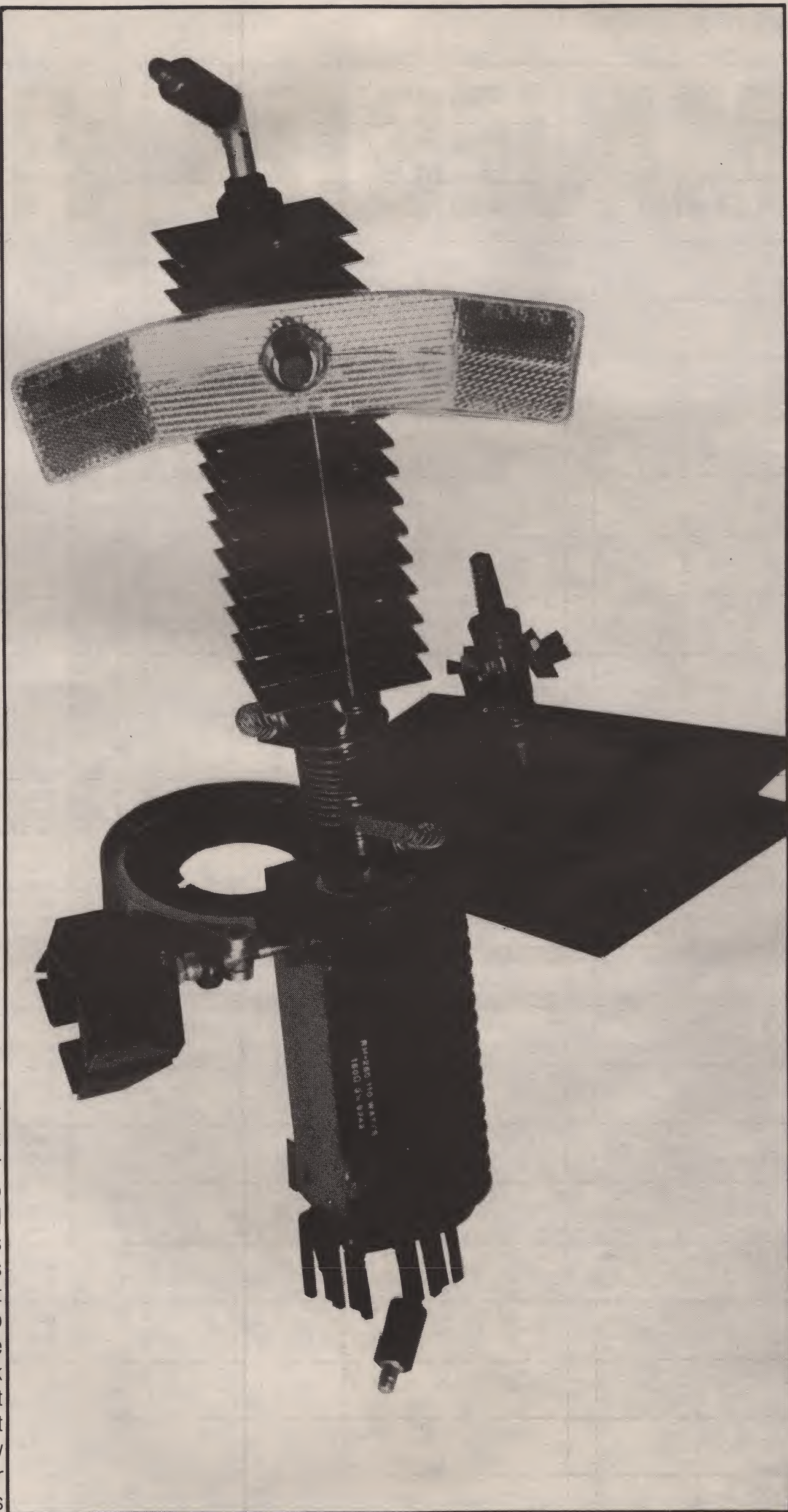
In the other room Donald had turned on the TV. He sat on the floor only about sixteen inches from the screen watching what looked like *The Three Stooges*. The picture was fuzzy and the color was bad, giving everyone a pinkish kind of glow. Carl was in the kitchen pouring himself a bowl of Raisin Bran. I stood watching *The Three Stooges* for a moment then walked through the kitchen and out the back door. Carl didn't look up as he sat eating at the kitchen table. Outside it was twilight, and the rush-hour traffic was heavy on Olympic Boulevard. I didn't want to go home to my room so I took a bus up Vermont to Hollywood Boulevard. I saw a junkie girl I knew standing on the corner. She wore hot pants and a flimsy blue halter and thick black eyelashes. "Hi, Lindy," I said. "Shitty fuckin' night, you know," she said, "there ain't any money out here." Lindy was deeply ugly, with severe acne scars that she tried to cover by spreading foundationlike caulking compound over all the little holes on her face. She had been married once to a guy in Las Vegas who ended up shot to death in a casino parking lot. I said something to her and then hurried away. You couldn't encourage Lindy in conversation because she would drag you into a quagmire of suffering and resentment that stuck to your consciousness for days, like beach tar stuck to the soles of your feet.

Around ten-thirty I came out of the movie theater on Hollywood and Wilcox; it used to be called the Iris but they changed it, I think. Next to the theater is a falafel place that has a couple of video games in the back. I went up to the counter to order a coke and realized that next to me was the skinny white kid, Darryl. "Shit, man," he said, "I keep running into you." He looked like he was still pretty loaded. "Geez man, that's really somethin' isn't it, that we've run into each other three times today." "Yeah," I said. I found myself smiling for some reason, the way you do with a younger brother or some young girl who is always making a fool of herself over you. "That was good dope," he said, inching his face closer to mine, then continuing in a softer more confidential tone, "I could bring you a lot of action if the quality stays like that." I didn't say anything. I smiled again, briefly, then looked away. I paid for my coke and stuck a straw through the perforated hole in the plastic lid. As I went to sit down Darryl followed me. I realized I expected him to, and was happy that he did. The music on the juke box was Middle Eastern. I didn't know they had 45s of Arabian music. Darryl sat across from me. He was still nodding off occasionally even though it had been about five hours since he'd fixed.

I gave him a couple of blankets and told him to sleep on the couch. I turned on the TV and grabbed the *TV Guide*. Darryl was standing in the alcove just off the bathroom looking at himself in the mirror. He kept pushing strands of greasy blond hair off his forehead as he checked his look from different angles. He took off his shirt and sat down on the couch. A movie about World War II with Robert Ryan was on and we watched about thirty minutes of it without speaking, even during commercials. Darryl pulled off his jeans. He had on jockey underwear and had an obvious hard-on. He saw me look at it. "Heroin hard-on," he said. "You haven't fixed for over seven hours." "Yeah I did, I mean I had a little snort just now in the bathroom." He smiled as he said it, aware that I knew he was lying. "I don't want to get into shooting dope," I said, "I want to tell you that." Darryl looked at me, his expression serious. He looked down at his erection. "That shit is death, I'm not going to get off into that again," I said more emphatically. Darryl turned and walked into the kitchen. I stood looking at the war movie on television. I stepped over to the set and turned it off. I felt very afraid. I stepped over to where his blue jeans lay on the floor. I put one foot on them, then the other. I closed my eyes. I wanted to remember other important things to tell him. □



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**Kathleen Thomas**

Gravity's Rainbow, 1984



**Just Another**

# MAJESTIC VISUAL



Forbidden Planet



2001: A Space Odyssey

## **Helen Knode**

"I spent the first half of the film nudging my wife black and blue and saying again and again, 'I don't believe it.'" Thus spoke Charles Champlin in his April 5, 1968, *L.A. Times* review of Stanley Kubrick's newly released *2001: A Space Odyssey*. It's hard now to imagine the kind of pandemonium this high-tech space opera provoked, hard to imagine anything could have been so amazing that a grown critic would admit publicly he'd behaved like a dazzled kid during the film. Yet, at the time, the mainstream film critics expressed their opinion of *2001* with such vehemence — either they loved it or they loathed it passionately — that Champlin's enthusiasm was of only average intensity.

No one had ever laid eyes on anything remotely resembling this film. To produce it, Kubrick, top film technicians, science fiction author Arthur C. Clark and experts in space technology spent four years and ten million of MGM's dollars. The film was innovative at every technical level, from the unprecedented use of natural source lighting on its sets to the more than 200 special effects sequences required to simulate life in space. Gene Youngblood, then writing for the *L.A. Free Press*, remarked that Kubrick had completely reinvented montage and continuity. The *Christian Science Monitor's* Louise Sweeney said *2001* made "science fiction films that have gone before look like interstellar waxworks," and Hollis Alpert in *Saturday Review* said Kubrick "had discovered new possibilities for the screen image." The film was called a landmark, a monument, and an unparalleled cinematic achievement. Only the stingiest of critics — Pauline Kael among them — disagreed that, from every technical point of view, *2001* was visionary and, more than that, revolutionary.

The radical nature of *2001's* technology, so advanced that all the critics found it absolutely mysterious, put overwhelming pressure on the normal guidelines by which critics evaluated films. The extremity of the stress is reflected in Andrew Sarris' withering remark that not only was *2001* an "uninteresting failure," it wasn't a film at all. The majority of critics, less impetuous than Sarris, were unwilling to say *2001* wasn't a film, but were nonetheless incapable of saying anything substantive about its content. Their usual paradigms simply couldn't derive any meaning from the plot, the affectless characters, the hostile computer HAL, or the strange ending with an embryo and Keir Dullea in a French provincial bedroom. None of the normal critical expectations were met by *2001's* content. But rather than alter their expectations, the critics suspended them temporarily. This meant that something exceedingly rare in the history of film reviewing occurred: The critics praised a film, called it a milestone even, but didn't have the vaguest notion of what the film meant.



# EXPERIENCE

## *How Mainstream Film Critics Stopped Worrying and Learned To Love Technology*

Critics sympathetic to *2001* but baffled by it got around the contradiction in several ways. The easiest strategy was to describe rather than explain it; this is the oldest trick in the critics' playbook. Or the critics said the ending was open to individual interpretation, that *2001*, like Antonioni's *Blow Up*, which had just been released, was cinematic Rohrschach inkblot test. The critic, therefore, could not presume to intervene with an idiosyncratic interpretation. Some said that the special effects and the experience of the film compensated for the absence of linear sense and common humanity. *Box Office*'s Jim Watters wrote: "Needless to say, audiences should be as baffled by the last part of the film as they are stimulated by the whole of this space epic." About the overall plot of *2001*, Champlin guessed that they're going to Jupiter but didn't know whether they made it. About the film's lack of closure, he said, "Any annoyance over the ending cannot really compromise Kubrick's epic achievement, his mastery of the techniques of screen sight and screen sound to create impact and illusion." It's a rare day, as I said, that a mainstream critic doesn't demand that a film be as clear as the azure sky in deepest summer.

*2001*'s detractors, because they could discern no content in the film, accused it of being masturbatory art for art's sake. The technological wizardry served only one purpose: to gratify Kubrick's pretensions.

The more radical critics, those willing to follow Kubrick's vision right into the 21st century, understood that the content was as revolutionary as the technology. What the film signified was as clear to them as the azure sky. Watters of *Box Office* talked about the death of old-style narrative, about avant-garde conventions permeating mainstream practice. "The straightforward story has had it," he announced. Seconding this notion in the *London Times*, John Russell Taylor talked about "a whole new way of assimilating narrative." He said that *2001* showed there was no longer a demand for plot but for "a series of vivid moments." These sentiments were echoed in remarks made by other critics who invoked Marshall McLuhan's theories and said that youth in the late 1960s were less verbal and more visual.

Youngblood, in the *L.A. Free Press*, said *2001* was structured like a Hesse novel and that the film attempted to situate man in some cosmic evolution. He interpreted the emotionless players as a commentary on the depersonalizing and dehumanizing effects of modern existence. Youngblood's extensive analytical remarks on the film are evidence that the people who really "dug" *2001* were young people, leftists and hippies, people willing to think visually and radically. *2001: A Space Odyssey* was the first "art" film to make it at the box office in America without the support of the New York critics, the majority of whom despised it. *2001* was a success without even the comprehension of most of the country's film reviewers.



*2001: A Space Odyssey*



*Star Wars*



*Forbidden Planet* was to the 1950s what *2001* was to the 1960s: the absolute last word in cinematic special effects. Under conditions of darkest secrecy, it took MGM technicians and Walt Disney animators two years and \$2 million to make the most advanced science fiction film in a decade bursting with science fiction flicks. But, unlike *2001*, this film, and the incredible technical skill and scientific research drawn upon to make it, in no way disrupted the normal functioning of the reviewers' critical judgments.

The film's innovations, of course, were duly noted. *The Hollywood Reporter* congratulated *Forbidden Planet* for some of the most exciting special effects yet seen on film. The *Mirror-News* of Los Angeles said the film featured "the slickest flying saucers ever built by studio technicians." It is considered, in retrospect, a pioneering effort in filmic special effects, but contemporary reviewers were more concerned with plot, character, and acting. This observation by the *New Yorker* critic was typical of the kind of praise *Forbidden Planet* received:

Except that they refer now and then to mysterious gyroscopic gadgets that apparently keep their saucer from spilling all over the Milky Way, they're just a gang of regular American fellows anxious to complete their mission and get back to places like Kansas City.

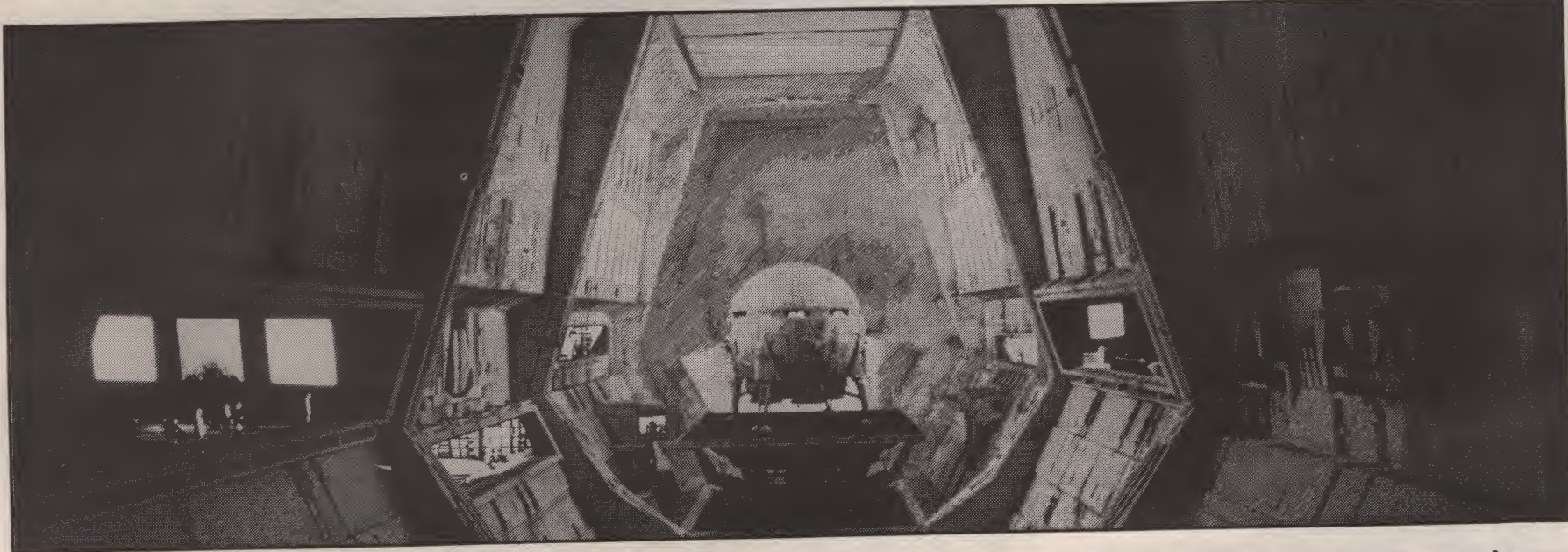
*Heart* was a visually stunning and, some would say, brilliant commentary on the flatness of human relations in late modern society. Just as Kubrick did before him, Coppola explored the visual as a means of communication and downplayed the verbal. The critics murdered *One From the Heart*. It lacked believability, the psychology of the characters was clichéd, the dialogue was impossibly stupid. Content, the human dimension, is what counts in film — first, last, and always. Form is secondary; it's the invisible medium via which the story is told. Again, for the critics to permit *2001*'s formal brilliance to substitute for a good story was a rare occasion.

Secondly, we learn that the significance of state-of-the-art or radically original technology ultimately resides in the uses to which technology is put and the context of its reception. *Forbidden Planet* exploited all the latest in filmic special effects yet outraged no one; its future vision corresponded to generally accepted views of things to come. Program notes for *2001* alleged that the film was merely a logical extension of what was already known in 1968:

The real world of science is now so fantastic that old-fashioned science fiction movies — with space ships on strings — look tame and out of date, especially to the modern generation of movie goers who

Ultimately, conservative inertia prevailed over radical insight and, by 1977, we're back to *Forbidden Planet*. Only the film was called *Star Wars* and it had two Robby the Robots.

It was my original thesis that *Star Wars* was a monster blockbuster because of its pow! zap! space nerd computerized special effects, which made *2001* look like a cut-and-paste job. This is only partially true. *Star Wars* was a hit mainly because of its story, a story that George Lucas' state-of-the-art technology assisted but did not outweigh. In the reviews, *Star Wars* is praised *ad infinitum* for the benign invisibility of its special effects. They blended right into the "pure sweet fun" of the "buoyant, exuberant plot." *Newsweek's* Jack Kroll: "This friendliness is the key emotion in this clean, clever, entertaining movie. It's a feeling that crackles in the special effects." *Friendly* special effects?!? *Variety*: "The story is one of people not of garish gadgetry . . . one identifies with the characters and accepts, as do they, the intriguing intergalactic world in which they live." The Los Angeles *Herald Examiner*: "The most endearing quality of *Star Wars* may be its belief that basic human emotions will remain constant. Technology is powerful but people are in control." *Variety* encapsulated the film's fortuitous melding of advanced technology and old-style human values in a now-familiar observation: "Lucas has taken us all back to the future."



Two other crucial human notes were struck, according to the critics, in Walter Pidgeon's acting, which one critic said highlighted "the credibility of the entire production," and in Robby the Robot, a metal-plated His Man Friday that one critic wished he could have in his own home as a personal valet.

The contrast between *Forbidden Planet's* placid, critical-business-as-usual reviews and the angry, euphoric, apocalyptic reviews *2001* received teaches us two things. One is that the essentially humanist nature of critical paradigms persist. If a film is formally unchallenging or unoriginal (and most films fall into this category), the critics focus on its humanity: Are the characters believable? Is the plot plausible? Are there lessons to be learned here? Does the end successfully resolve the conflicts of the story? Does the audience care? The critics seldom relent on the requirement that films make us care, allow us to identify with its human subjects. In the infrequent case of a film that wants to tell its story in a visually or formally innovative manner, the critics accuse it of lacking humanity. Because their view of how a story gets told is fundamentally literary — a view conditioned by ideological/historical/cultural factors — they aren't equipped to "read" visual information as a narrative. When a filmmaker experiments with form, the result is always, according to the critics, at the expense of content. Nor is it just science fiction films that the critics attack for being overly preoccupied with form. Francis Ford Coppola's 1982 film *One From the*

have grown up with Sputnik, Cape Kennedy, and manned space flight.

But *2001* wasn't just a fiction that grew reasonably out of contemporary scientific knowledge; if it were, the critics wouldn't have reacted with the dazzlement and incomprehension with which they did. Kubrick, via great technical sophistication, brought a shocking and unprecedented view of the future to the screen, one with no plot, no "human" characters, and minimal dialogue. He punched a hole in the consciousness of the late 1960s. His was a radical cinematic gesture which paralleled political and social movements of the time. A few critics dared talk about this hole, about how Kubrick had brought us to the brink of a cinematic millennium. These critics talked about new ways of seeing and the end of narrative as it had been understood. The majority of critics, however, preferred to suspend judgment, to sit back and marvel. They refused to think about the implications of the fact that *2001* violated all of their humanist demands — and was still great art.

Kubrick could have altered mainstream cinematic storytelling, and mainstream American film criticism, if the critics had responded to *2001* and to the stress the film placed on their traditional paradigms by re-examining those standards (easier said than done, I realize). Instead, they simply abandoned their rigorous standards, unconcerned that their praise of *2001*'s technological prowess placed them in a profoundly contradictory position.

Content is still the privileged bearer of meaning in mainstream art. Nothing is more tenaciously conservative than the critics' demand for "humanity" in art. The radical potential of formal innovation is something that mainstream critics cannot imagine, despite constant theoretical onslaughts by artists who'd have it that form is as political and as interpretable as content. Revolutions in form, such as the one effected by Kubrick in *2001*, are easily disassembled and defused, either by ignoring them or by thinking about them in such a way that they become like other things: Difference magically becomes identity as history is (re)written. For example, *Forbidden Planet*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and *Star Wars* are consistently grouped together as films which form a direct line in the evolution of filmic special effects. Next to their differences, in my opinion, this one similarity is almost trivial.

Or P.R. people, the real spokesmen of our cultural present, reduce a film's complexity into one catch phrase, a phrase so simple that it is similar to phrases used to describe other films. *2001* in its time was called "A Majestic Visual Experience." Huge differences between the films, including their historical specificity, thereby collapse into the sameness of advertising hype. It's enough to make you believe that history isn't going anywhere and that progress is a pathetic illusion. □



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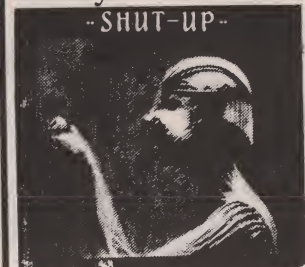
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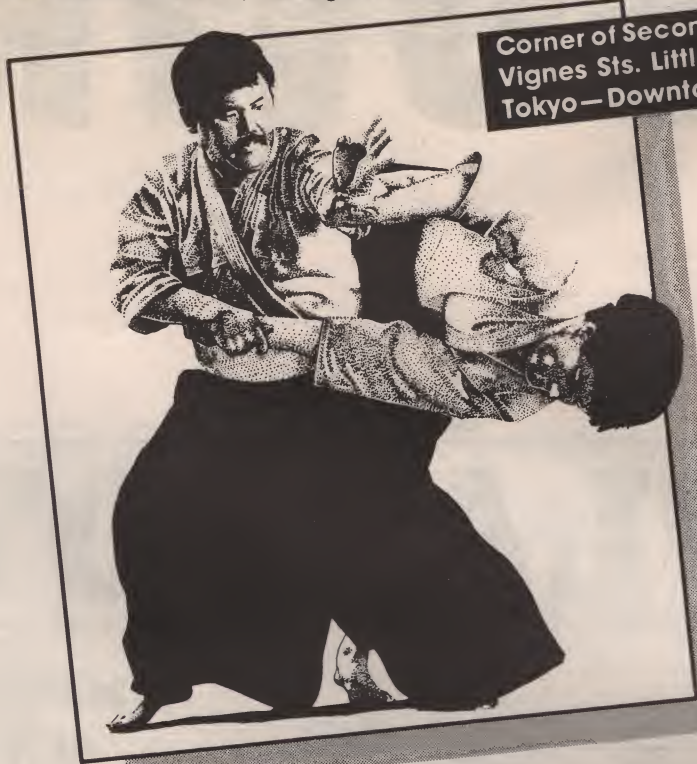
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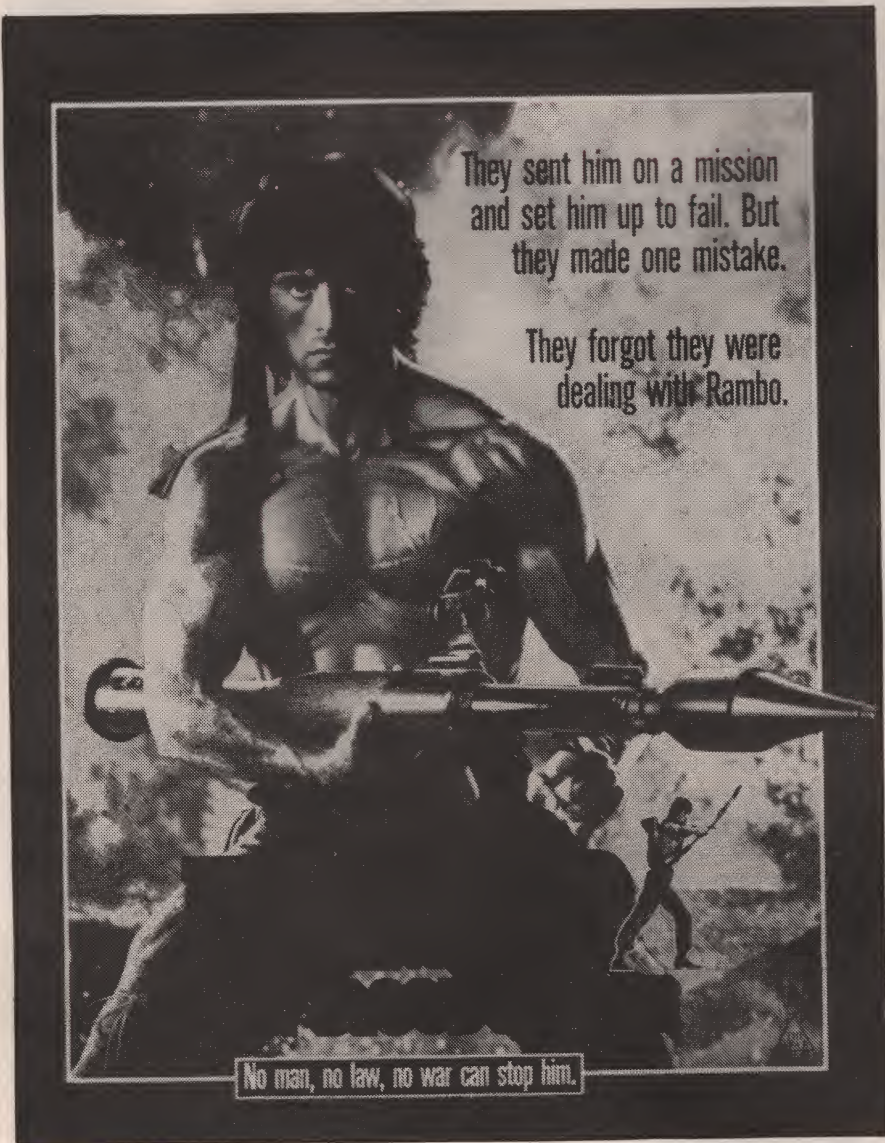
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# BREAKDOWN



If Rambo had a sex life, he'd be a chronic premature ejaculator. He'd come all over the world, with no regret and no warning, making it too slippery for democracy — or any other kind of political organization.

No man, no law, no war can stop him from spilling his used cartridges on the ground.

The Spirit of America.

—Helen Knode



The Madonna: virginal and pure, porcelain complexion and flaxen hair. But there are dark roots under all that flax, revealing the calculating, street-smart brunette.

Religion, the symbolism of the Virgin, the denial of eroticism and the debunking of all preconceived notions of womanhood are in caucus around Madonna's bellybutton. In her yin-yang approach to dressing, Madonna blurs the line between female submission (bras and corsets as a form of bondage) and male dominance (in her lingerie, designed by men, and her men's clothing). The lingerie is stripped of both mysticism and eroticism, as it might have been enjoyed — fetishized — in a third character in sexual play: the madonna as whore.

Women appear, men act, says John Berger. Women are viewed by men, he contends, as constantly checking their delicate self-image in mirrors, making sure it, like the lace slip, doesn't show beneath the carefully guarded hemline.

Madonna rips off the skirt. She looks down her nose, from the cover of a magazine that is an opinion leader for men's image of women, unafraid that her yang — and her slip — is showing.

—Liese Gardner

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